

Tourism flourishes as revenue rises by 15% to US\$2.7bn

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Syrian tourism has enjoyed strong growth in visitor numbers and revenue so far this year, despite the effects of the global recession, according to the tourism minister Saadallah Agha al-Qalaa. In an interview with Al Hayat, a pan-Arab newspaper, on the sidelines of a tourism conference in Damascus in mid-August, Mr Agha al-Qalaa said that tourism revenue in the first seven months of 2009 had reached S£125bn (US\$2.7bn), compared with S£108bn in January-July 2008, a year-on-year increase of 15.7%. He said that there had been solid growth in tourist arrivals from both of Syria's core markets—Europe and the Gulf Arab states. He said that Syria's offering of primarily cultural tourism to the European market had put the country in good stead, as this market is typically less sensitive than leisure tourism to economic downturns. The Gulf Arab market, by contrast, had been favorably affected by the recession from Syria's point of view, as many tourists opted to travel within the region rather than going further afield, the minister observed. He said that tourism now accounts for 11% of GDP and 23% of Syria's foreign exchange earnings. The most recent full-year figures for Syria's balance of payments from the central bank are for 2007, when "travel" (in effect tourism) accounted for S£143bn in gross income out of total current-account income of S£862bn, or 16.6%. Syria does not include tourism as a separate category in its GDP statistics.